AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin

How significant is parental influence in explaining homelessness in Australia?

ALMOST HALF OF THOSE CURRENTLY RECEIVING HOMELESSNESS ASSISTANCE HAD PARENTS WHO EXPERIENCED HOMELESSNESS. PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMS, ESPECIALLY THOSE ORIENTED TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, ARE CRITICAL IN BREAKING THE CYCLE OF INTERGENERATIONAL HOMELESSNESS.

KEY POINTS

- Around half of all survey respondents (48.5%) indicated their parents were also homeless at some point in their lives.

- Around half of all respondents experienced their first spell of homelessness prior to the age of 18.

- Indigenous respondents were more likely than non-Indigenous respondents to have experienced primary homelessness prior to the age of 18 (many before the age of 12).

- Many respondents experienced significant issues in their home environment prior to the age of 18, with around half reporting that they had run away from home at some point prior to the age of 18.

- Close to half of all respondents who indicated that they had a father in their life reported that their father had a serious drinking problem. Incarceration rates for fathers were also high. These issues were especially widespread amongst Indigenous households.

- Significant inter-parental conflict in the childhood home was evident for many respondents, with over half (58.8%) reporting police intervention due to inter-parental conflict.

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- Earlier occurrences of homelessness may be a predictor of subsequent adult homelessness. The role of individual family risk factors appear critical to the experience of many adult homeless people regardless of system-level responses and the availability of affordable accommodation.

CONTEXT

This project responded to the White Paper, *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness* (Australia Government 2008).

Identifying the prevalence of intergenerational homelessness has implications for preventative and early intervention approaches to dealing with homelessness. Such policies might be focussed on the needs of children and teenagers in families where significant domestic and family violence and problematic alcohol and drug use is evident.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research surveyed clients of homelessness services to better understand the causes of homelessness. The Intergenerational Homelessness Survey elicited information on the timing and form of homeless experiences of clients and also the incidence of parental homelessness and parental-based homelessness risk factors.

A random sample of specialist homelessness services from all over Australia was recruited to the Intergenerational Homelessness Survey. Services were included if they provided crisis/short-term accommodation and support; medium/long-term accommodation and support; day support; outreach support or multiple forms of support. Data was collected between November 2009 and March 2010, and the 647 surveys returned made it one of the largest studies of homelessness in Australia.

In addition, focus groups were conducted with specialist homelessness services providers in New South Wales. These focus groups considered issues arising from the preliminary analysis of survey findings in more depth.

KEY FINDINGS

Intergenerational homelessness

Around half (48.5%) of all those currently receiving support from specialist homelessness support services reported that one or more of their parents were also homeless.

More respondents reported that their mother was homeless at some time in her life than respondents who said their father had been homeless. This may reflect a higher proportion of cases where the mother was known to the respondent (as compared with a father), a higher rate of homelessness among mothers or that respondents knew more about their mother's life than their father's life (perhaps as a result of their father's absence).

The rate of intergenerational homelessness among male respondents was lower than female respondents. One driver of this was the higher rate of intergenerational homelessness among Indigenous Australian compared with non-Indigenous Australian respondents and the over-representation of Indigenous women in the sample.

The main form of parent's homelessness was couch surfing with family or friends.

Childhood and teenage experiences of homelessness

Thirty-seven per cent of respondents experienced their first episode of primary homelessness prior to the age of 18, and 15 per cent experienced primary homelessness prior to the age of 12.

Forty-two per cent of those who experienced an episode of primary homelessness prior to the age of 12 experienced less than one month of primary homelessness in total, and a further 25 per cent experienced homelessness for less than one year.

The vast majority of respondents (90%) who experienced primary homelessness during adolescence experienced more than one episode.

During childhood and adolescence, the most common state of homelessness experienced was couch surfing or staying with family or friends. Overall, 53 per cent of respondents stayed with family and friends at some point prior to the age of 18 because they had nowhere else to go. The prevalence of couch surfing during childhood was higher for women than for men.

The next most common form of homelessness during childhood and adolescence was staying in crisis and emergency accommodation, with 28.7 per cent of respondents experiencing this prior to the age of 18.

Indigenous intergenerational homelessness

Adult Indigenous clients of specialist homelessness services experienced a substantially higher rate of intergenerational homelessness (69%) than for non-Indigenous participants (43%). Thirty-nine per cent of Indigenous respondents indicated that one or both of their parents were primary homeless at some point compared with 15 per cent for non-Indigenous respondents.

Twenty-four per cent of Indigenous respondents experienced primary homelessness prior to the age of 12, compared with 13 per cent for non-Indigenous respondents. Forty-two per cent of Indigenous participants reported that they had couch surfed with family and friends because they had nowhere else to live prior to the age of 12, compared with 23 per cent of non-Indigenous respondents.

Risk factors

Many respondents experienced significant issues in the home prior to the age of 18 and there appeared to be risk factors in precipitating homelessness.

• Significant inter-parental conflict in the home. Over half of respondents (58.8%) reported police intervention in the childhood home due to inter-parental conflict. Around 20 per cent of respondents reported that police came to

their home six or more times because of inter-parental conflict. Childhood exposure to inter-parental conflict can be considered a proximal risk factor for homelessness and a key driver of homelessness among young people.

• Violence in the home was associated with around half of all respondents leaving home. A substantial proportion of this group fled their home on numerous occasions, including 22 per cent of respondents who left home more than five times.

• Problems with fathers were critical, with close to half of all respondents reporting a father with a serious drinking problem. Incarceration rates for fathers were also high.

• Adult clients of homelessness services were significantly more likely to have been placed in foster care or residential care as children and teenagers than those in the general population.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Prevention and early intervention—this study suggests that parental homelessness appears to have an important impact on the next generation.

Need to address early onset—this study shows the high prevalence of early onset homelessness amongst currently homeless adults. Effective programs in childhood and young adulthood could have major positive benefits in reducing subsequent adult homelessness.

Parental violence, drug and alcohol problems are at heart of issue—preventative and early intervention programs around parental domestic violence, parental alcohol and drug use problems and entry into out-of-home care for children and young teenagers could break the cycle of homelessness across generations of the same family. It is critical an equal focus be put on children, young teenagers and adults in programs that address issues around the behaviour of adults in the family home.

Out of home care—because many adult clients of homeless services were placed in foster care and out-of-home care services when they were growing up, these programs represent a key point of engagement in preventing future homelessness for young people.

Indigenous focus—the very high rates of intergenerational homelessness and early onset of homelessness among Indigenous clients of homelessness services (particularly in primary homelessness) points to a particular need to focus on programs in the Indigenous area. Programs must address the needs of Indigenous children and young teenagers in the regional and remote settings where they live.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 80516, *Intergenerational homelessness and the use of homelessness services*.

Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: www.ahuri.edu.au or by contacting AHURI Limited on +61 3 9660 2300.

REFERENCE

Australian Government (2008) *The Road Home: A national approach to reducing homelessness*, The Homelessness White Paper, Australian Government, Canberra.

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